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a universe of subjective moments available to aesthetic experience, makes it possible to begin to see how and where the utopian impulse subsists in the entire spectrum of social behaviors that are utterly intrinsic to music in all of its forms.

The Political Bloch: Listening for the Nonsynchronous

ELAINE KELLY

It is easy to overlook the extent to which Bloch's aesthetic thought was shaped by the political turmoil of the twentieth century. The esoteric, almost otherworldly nature of major tomes such as *The Spirit of Utopia* and *The Principle of Hope* evinces a detachment from reality, and Bloch's writings on music, as Benjamin Korstvedt observes in his contribution here, can seem strangely divorced from the social contexts of music making. Yet Bloch's cultural philosophy was also a profoundly political project that evolved in response to contemporary events. Fundamental to his thinking was the desire to formulate a Marxist aesthetic that aimed not to enlighten the masses via the didactic methods of socialist realism but to prompt them instead to utopian dreaming through the prism of specific cultural objects and forms.

This concern was paramount in the writings Bloch produced under the looming shadow of fascism in the late 1920s and 1930s. He conceived of both *Heritage of Our Times* (1935) and his many contributions to the expressionism debate in the second half of the 1930s as a call to arms. Indeed, he introduced *Heritage of Our Times* as a "hand-to-hand combat,"⁹⁴ a literary weapon in a war waged against not only the Nazis but also the left for failing to offer a viable opposition to National Socialism. The reductive focus of orthodox or "vulgar" Marxism on historical materialism and its resulting neglect of the essential role played by myth, dreams, and utopian thought in human experience had, Bloch posited, left the German masses vulnerable to exploitation by fascism.⁹⁵

The primary target of Bloch's criticism during this period was György Lukács. Once close intellectual partners, the pair had drifted apart in the 1920s as Lukács gravitated toward the hard-line socialist realist aesthetics of the Soviet Union while Bloch formulated his own antithetical brand of warm-stream Marxism. By the 1930s their views on the utopian capacity of art were diametrically opposed. Lukács located the power of art in its ability to reflect the unchanging totality or essence of life. The goal of the artist, he argued, was not to capture the here and now but "to penetrate

94. Preface to the 1935 edition of Bloch's *Erbschaft dieser Zeit*, 18 (my translation). Neville Plaice and Stephen Plaice render "Handgemenge" as "scuffle" in their English translation, which does not quite capture the full import of Bloch's original: Bloch, *Heritage of Our Times*, 3.

95. Bloch, *Heritage of Our Times*, 60.

the laws governing objective reality and to uncover the deeper, hidden, mediated, not immediately perceptible network of relationships that go to make up society.”⁹⁶ Bloch deemed this homogenizing construct of totality to be fundamentally flawed. “What if,” he asked, “Lukács’s reality—a coherent, infinitely mediated totality—is not so objective after all? . . . What if authentic reality is also discontinuity?”⁹⁷ Central to Bloch’s objection to Lukács’s totality was the concept of the “simultaneity of the non-simultaneous” (“Gleichzeitigkeit des Ungleichzeitigen”), which he formulated in *Heritage of Our Times*. Societies do not progress in a singular fashion, he argued, and “not all people exist in the same Now.”⁹⁸ In the case of Germany in the 1920s and 1930s, for example, he identified pre-capitalist impulses coexisting with capitalism, reactionary with progressive forces, and the old with the new. Lukács’s theory of reflection was up to the task of neither capturing nor indeed catering for these incongruous currents. What was needed instead was a “multi-temporal and multi-spatial dialectic,” replete with “polyrhythmics” and “counterpoint.”⁹⁹

Bloch’s emphasis on nonsynchronicity and his complex diagnosis of the rise of fascism placed him at odds with a number of key Marxist-Leninist tenets regarding the question of historical teleology. First, he located the truest articulations of reality not in art that reflected an ideal of dialectical resolution but in that which exposed the dialectical contradictions and ruptures in society that had yet to be resolved. Accordingly, he celebrated the stylistic diversity of Weill’s *Threepenny Opera*, the “unreliable” and conflicted nature of Stravinsky’s music,¹⁰⁰ and the surrealist montages of Joyce, which he viewed as being a “description of the confusion of experienced reality with collapsed spheres and caesuras.”¹⁰¹ Secondly, he refuted the perspective that revolutionary art emanates primarily from periods of revolution or societal ascent. As he asked in an essay written jointly with Hanns Eisler, “are Flaubert, Zola and Verlaine, although they were not borne by their rising class, really of lesser stature than the unknown poets of the French Revolution?”¹⁰² More specifically, revolutionary periods are rarely as homogeneous as their portrayals in retrospective accounts would suggest. Ironically, Bloch found the most productive periods for revolutionary art often to be those of societal decline or transition, when the tensions of nonsimultaneity are most transparent. Here, his thinking resonated with Adorno’s model of the late alienated artist shattering the illusory surface of the status quo. Whereas Adorno, however, viewed the moments of “truth”

96. Lukács, “Realism in the Balance,” 38.

97. Bloch, “Discussing Expressionism,” 22.

98. Bloch, *Heritage of Our Times*, 97.

99. *Ibid.*, 115.

100. *Ibid.*, 217.

101. *Ibid.*, 205.

102. Bloch and Eisler, “‘Avant-Garde Art and the Popular Front’ and ‘To Inherit Art,’” 12.

that emerge in such conditions in largely pessimistic terms, for Bloch they offered glimpses of alternative realities; “the achievements of Picasso and Einstein,” he explained, “are anticipatory: they attest to a world that does not yet exist.”¹⁰³

Korstvedt takes Bloch to task in his essay for ignoring the materialities of music making. In this Bloch certainly stood apart from mainstream Marxist-Leninism. He rejected what he saw as facile attempts to reduce artworks to their socioeconomic origins, and refused to equate progressive politics with progressive art; tellingly, he was happy to include Schoenberg and Stravinsky alongside Eisler as exemplars of modernism.¹⁰⁴ Crucially, he identified the power of music as lying not in the conditions of its production but in those of its reception, of its afterlife. He did not view music as a direct agent of social change, arguing instead a twofold role for it. First, it is a harbinger; it indicates social “change in advance, by ‘absorbing’ and speaking aloud what is dissolving and forming under the surface.” And secondly, it serves to unlock utopian impulses: “it illuminates the impetuses of those who march into the future even without music, but more easily with it.”¹⁰⁵ Bloch deemed orthodox Marxists to be particularly remiss where the second of these functions was concerned. By refusing to accommodate irrationalism into their myopic construct of reality and to engage with forms of culture that had resonances with the masses, intellectuals such as Lukács had limited their capacity to encourage utopian dreaming on a broad scale. To counter this Bloch demanded a theory of reason that “*does justice to the whole of reality; consequently also to its complicated and imaginative components.*”¹⁰⁶ He called for the left to admit a far broader spectrum into their socialist canon, to look beyond hallowed classical works, and to reckon with the emotional power of popular culture rather than relinquishing it wholesale to the Nazis.

Underlying much of Bloch’s thought in this regard is the importance he places on childhood experience, a theme discussed by Sherry Lee. The memories and sensations of childhood are for Bloch a distinct repository for utopian thought; opportunities to relive the adventures, dreams, and sheer fun of childhood are key to breaking through the tedium of the now and rendering the mind receptive to other possibilities. Thus, for example, his predilection for fairs, fairy tales, and above all “colportage,” a term he used to denote the adventure stories and tales of rescue that promised happiness to the lower classes in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Bloch did not consider this pulp literature to be a form of escapism. He saw it rather as being replete with possibility. It has “wishful fantasies of fulfilment within it; and it posits the lustre of this wishful imagination not just for distraction or

103. Ibid., 6, 12.

104. Ibid., 12.

105. Bloch, *Heritage of Our Times*, 213.

106. Ibid., 135 (Bloch’s italics).

intoxication, but for *provocation* and for *invasion*.¹⁰⁷ And the possibilities inherent in colportage are not restricted to the genre itself. Its spirit can be harnessed to rejuvenate canonic works whose cultural surplus has been deadened by undue veneration and museum-like preservation. Bloch offers Wagner as one such candidate for “decontaminat[ion].” “We must learn,” he recommends, “to listen to Wagner, as we devoured Karl May, go with him to the fair.” This involves driving the “empty pathos” out from the operas, and locating instead Wagner’s “involuntary Offenbach.” Parody will ensue, Bloch admits, “but at least as a genuine condition in the work which is now simply covered up.”¹⁰⁸

Bloch’s writings on nonsynchronicity found little sympathy in Moscow, unsurprisingly, and were met with bewilderment in other quarters. Walter Benjamin notably observed of *Heritage of Our Times* that “the serious objection which I have to this book (if not to its author as well) is that it in absolutely no way corresponds to the conditions in which it appears, but rather takes its place inappropriately, like a great lord, who arriving at the scene of an area devastated by an earthquake can find nothing more urgent to do than to spread out the Persian carpets.”¹⁰⁹ Yet if Bloch was riding against the *Zeitgeist* in the 1930s, and again in the GDR, where he made his home in the 1950s, his voice can also be viewed as one of rupture or anticipation. Bloch left the GDR for West Germany in 1961 following the building of the Berlin Wall. In the years that followed, his utopian philosophy finally came of age. It served as inspiration both for the New Left in the West and for the generation of reform socialists who emerged in the late GDR and sought more humane and imaginative alternatives to the dogmatism of Marxist-Leninism. Bloch’s Marxism failed to save the socialist project. His relevance, however, is by no means past. On the contrary, his call to intellectuals to respond to the longing of the masses has new resonances in light of recent political events in the United States and across Europe.

The crisis of modernity, of which late socialism was an early manifestation, has resulted in a blanket rejection in certain quarters of rational ideals and politics. Bloch’s philosophy offers a potentially productive response to this disillusionment given that his utopianism is neither conservative nor nostalgic. He does not advocate withdrawal from modernity or contemporary society; instead, he seeks richer and more complex manifestations of both. His concept of nonsynchronicity is particularly important in this context for music scholars. In an age in which not only is it increasingly difficult to identify dominant aesthetic trends but accepted aesthetic value systems, particularly those of a single, monolithic modernism, have come under question, Bloch

107. Ibid., 161 (Bloch’s italics).

108. Ibid., 344–45.

109. Letter to Alfred Cohn of February 6, 1935, translated in Rabinbach, “Unclaimed Heritage,” 5 (translation slightly modified).

provides some starting points for thinking about how we might usefully reconsider constructs of progress and sociopolitical relevance in music. He challenges us to forge more productive and open-ended relationships with the musical past, and his attunement to vernacular culture (however parochial) urges us to explore ways of determining value in music that look beyond the predilections of elite and conventionally literate forms of artistry. Ultimately, one might argue, Bloch's utopian philosophy encourages a postmodern aesthetic that embraces plurality but is free of nihilism.

Appendix: Selected writings by Bloch

- Adorno, Theodor W., and Ernst Bloch. "Something's Missing: A Discussion between Ernst Bloch and Theodor W. Adorno on the Contradictions of Utopian Longing." In Bloch, *Utopian Function*, 1–17.
- Bloch, Ernst. *Atheism in Christianity: The Religion of the Exodus and the Kingdom*. Translated by J. T. Swann. New York: Herder & Herder, 1972. Originally published as *Atheismus im Christentum: Zur Religion des Exodus und des Reichs* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1968).
- . *Avicenna und die Aristotelische Linke*. Berlin: Rütten & Loening, 1952.
- . "Discussing Expressionism." Translated by Rodney Livingstone. In *Aesthetics and Politics*, by Theodor Adorno et al., with an afterword by Fredric Jameson, 16–27. London: Verso, 1980. Translation of "Diskussionen über Expressionismus."
- . "Diskussionen über Expressionismus." *Das Wort: Literarische Monatsschrift* 6 (June 1938): 103–12.
- . "Don Giovanni" (1928). In *Experiment Krolloper, 1927–1931*, by Hans Curjel, 340–42. Munich: Prestel, 1975.
- . "Erbschaft aus Dekadenz? Ein Gespräch mit Iring Fetscher und Georg Lukács (1967)." In *Gespräche mit Ernst Bloch*, edited by Rainer Traub and Harald Wieser, 2nd ed., 28–40. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1977.
- . *Erbschaft dieser Zeit*. Zurich: Oprecht & Helbling, 1935. Expanded edition (1962) in Bloch, *Gesamtausgabe*, vol. 4.
- . *Essays on the Philosophy of Music*. Translated by P. Palmer. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985.
- . *Experimentum mundi: Frage, Kategorien des Herausbringens, Praxis*. In Bloch, *Gesamtausgabe*, vol. 15.
- . *Geist der Utopie*. 2nd ed. Berlin: Paul Cassirer, 1923.
- . *Geist der Utopie: Faksimile der Ausgabe von 1918*. [1st ed.] Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1985.
- . *Gesamtausgabe*. 17 vols. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1961–85.
- . *Heritage of Our Times*. Translated by Neville Plaice and Stephen Plaice. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991. Translation of *Erbschaft dieser Zeit*.
- . "Ideas as Transformed Material in Human Minds, or Problems of an Ideological Superstructure (Cultural Heritage)." In Bloch, *Utopian Function*, 18–71. Translation of "Ideelles als das im Menschenkopf umgesetzte Materielle."